DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 027 142 RE 001 302

By-Cameron, Jack R.

Syntax and Semantics in Reading.

Pub Date Apr 68

Note-6p.; Paper presented at International Reading Association conference, Boston, Mass., April 24-27, 1968.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40

Descriptors-*Classical Literature, *Current Events, Descriptive Linguistics, Language Development, News Media, Radio, Reading Comprehension, *Reading Instruction, *Semantics, *Syntax, Television

Teaching should reflect the facts of current language usage. This descriptive approach, when applied to reading, means that the child's reading education should focus on the realities of daily life. Syntactic analysis in reading has been handicapped by an overemphasis on lexical content at the expense of other syntactic structures. Thus, the student analyzes language in single words. If a broadened concept of syntactic analysis is to become a valid part of the reading program, it must follow the descriptive principle. Classical studies prepare students for the reading of classics but not for reading "Time" magazine or the daily newspapers. The following syntactic and semantic problems are involved in the intelligent reading of a newspaper: (1) headlines and their accuracy in relation to the story, (2) concentration of information in the lead paragraphs, and (3) frequent use of direct and indirect quotations. The reader should be aware of the verbal jugglings of the content possible within these three areas. Another untapped source of dynamic prose material is the spoken word of radio and television. Prose analysis will probably never be popular among students; however, if the material is pertinent, their interest will be greater. (WL)

ED027142

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

SYNTAX & SEMANTICS IN READING

(Delivered at International Reading Association convention in Boston: April, 1968)

Jack R. Cameron
Associate Professor of English Education
The University of Calgary
Calgary, Alberta

The Descriptive Principle

In recent years it has become clear that the only legitimate approach to the study of the English is descriptive. Prescriptive methods, based on the premise that it is the responsibility of the school system to make a priori assumptions about the language habits of people, are no longer defensible. Whatever English or reading teachers tell their students about the language should reflect as much as possible the facts of current usage; that is, it should be a realistic description of how speakers of English use the language today in various situations. This descriptive principle has most commonly been applied to the study of grammar and usage, but if it is interpreted a little more broadly it has important implications for reading education as well. Specifically, if students are to be efficient, intelligent readers, they must be trained to handle the syntactic and semantic problems that will face them in adult life. If much of their reading education is not focused on the realities of daily practice, the program is not descriptive, does not reflect the demands of popular usage, and is therefore open to the kind of attack currently aimed at the prescriptive teaching of grammar and usage.

Syntactic Analysis

RE001 302

One example is the study of syntax, that is, the arrangement of words in a sentence to show their relationship. It is probably not too much a wrench of this traditional definition to extend the term to encompass the study of sentence arrangement within a paragraph, including such questions as the following: What is the balance between loose and periodic constructions, between long and short sentences, between statements and questions? How does the writer employ repetition and exploit metaphor? Where does he quote from other sources? What devices does he use to emphasize his major points and to clarify the development of his theme?

Such stylistic analysis is important in the education of an efficient reader since it trains the eye to notice the syntactic patterns and rhetorical devices used by a writer to organize and dramatize his ideas. This sort of syntactic analysis as a standard phase of the developmental reading program throughout the public schools has been neglected. For one thing, vocabulary study rather than syntax has received most attention. And although it is

true that lexical content, which includes such features as the balance between native and borrowed words, and the use of slanted vocabulary, is a vital characteristic of style, it has been over-emphasized at the expense of the larger syntactic structures. Such emphasis, which encourages students to look at language largely in terms of single words, is a mistake. Because university English departments have concentrated on the historical approach to literature, teachers have not been trained to analyze prose style, and have thus concentrated on the bits and pieces of language, which is a simpler, more mechanical process. Training in stylistic analysis and practical criticism has been largely restricted to honors or graduate students, and although courses in the history and structure of the English language are appearing more frequently, the influence of linguistics on classroom practice is still slight.

Traditional vs Contemporary Material

But let us assume that such analysis either is or will shortly be a standard phase of an increasing number of progressive reading programs. It is then a matter of ensuring that the material used for practice meets the requirements of the descriptive principle. The sentences, paragraphs and essays used in comprehension and interpretation drills should prepare the student to handle the kind of syntax and thought patterns he will be faced with by the powerful and well-organized forces in society who will constantly be attempting to inform, reform, persuade and deceive him. As a result, it is folly to depend on literary materials as the foundation for a reading program. The teacher who undertakes extensive explication de texte with Swift, Dickens or Faulkner may be training students to read the literary classics, but not necessarily to read other things that in some ways are more important. This is not to say that ability to handle the often complex thinking and sentence structure of literature is not valuable; however, it is important to remind ourselves that there is no necessary transfer to reading material of a such different kind -- the daily paper, for instance. No doubt there is a certain elegance in the Senecan aphorisms of Bacon, in the grandly Ciceronian periodic constructions of Milton, and in the flamboyant, romantic prose of Ruskin, but undue attention to such reading takes valuable time from the analysis of contemporary prose, which is largely based in speech. If the reading program does not pay a good deal of attention to the prose of the mass media, it is not descriptive, and fails to provide the students with some civil defense against the media fallout that all of us meet every day.

I realize that I am open to the charge of talking like a Philistine, of de-emphasizing the noble literary heritage of western man, of advocating that we orient our education to the transient and often vulgar and tawdry products of a plastic, commercial culture. If I am charged with these things, I am misunderstood. My point is that if the products of our schools are excited about Shakespearean drama, and open the works of Jane Austen, Stephen Crane and Shirley Jackson with enthusiasm -- and yet are not efficient readers of Time magazine or the daily newspaper, then their reading education has been a failure. They are literate illiterates in a world that can less and less afford them.

Newspapers

I have mentioned the daily newspaper twice because it is a crucial component of any reading program which pretends to be descriptive and to reflect the reading habits of people generally. The daily paper is the print medium which most of our students will read more often than any other for the rest of their lives. In the brief space permitted here I would like to offer a couple of examples of how a casual approach to the syntax of the newspapers can leave the reader deceived and misinformed.

At least three syntactic and semantic problems are immediately apparent in reading a news story:

1) The statement or suggestion of the headline, and its accuracy in the light of the story following.

2) The concentration of information in the lead paragraphs, and the subsequent decline of syntactic compression and semantic content.

3) The frequent use of direct and indirect quotations.

For example, the newspapers of North America on April 1, 1968, featured two dramatic stories: President Lyndon Johnson's announcements of a bombing pause in North Vietnam, and of his withdrawal as a presidential candidate. One major Canadian paper headlined the first story as follows: NORTH VIETNAMESE SCORNFUL OF LBJ'S HALT IN BOMBING. My immediate reaction was disgust, and a certain despair. After all, the headline was quite direct and unambiguous. The lead, however, read as follows:

WASHINGTON -- A new Vietnam peace campaign gained momentum today following President Johnson's decision to halt the bombing of North Vietnam, but early indications point to rejection from Hanoi.

The efficient reader will immediately note that being "scornful" is not quite the same thing as "early indications point," and anyone who is distracted by the capital letters of the first clause and lets his eyes skip carelessly over the tail end of that opening compound sentence is probably still thinking of the North Vietnamese either as a bunch of stubborn Commies, or as firm and noble people who will not give in to military blackmail -- which it is depends on his political bias.

The next paragraph begins, "North Vietnamese sources in Peking branded Johnson's new peace overture. . . ." That phrase "in Peking" is an important qualifying syntactical unit which negates the original headline and changes the entire complexion of the story.

The third paragraph begins, "The Peking correspondent of the Japanese Kyodo news agency quoted the sources as saying. . . ." Do you see how far we have come in three sentences? A Japanese reporter's quoting of anonymous

sources in Red China has been headlined as NORTH VIETNAMESE SCORNFUL. When I guess at the number of readers who noticed that something was lost in the translation, I am not optimistic.

At this point in the story the large type petered out and was replaced by smaller print, an editorial device which suggests that the most important part of the story is over. But the intelligent reader will dig a paragraph deeper, into the fine print, and uncover this: "There still has been no official comment from Hanoi, however, and in Prague a North Vietnamese diplomat is reported to have said his government intends to give serious study to Johnson's curtailment of the bombing." Vague as it is, this report is at least as credible as the anonymous tip to a Japanese correspondent in Peking. In any case, it exposes the original headline as a lie, and why the editor chose to place the semantical and syntactical emphasis on the negative aspect of the story is the kind of problem in reading and logistics that public school classes should be analyzing almost daily. The thought and style of Matthew Arnold or Arnold Toynbee might be more sound and elegant, but most students will never read Arnold and Toynbee --they will, however, read the newspaper that is tossed daily on the doorstep.

Across the page from the Vietnam story was an Associated Press interview with Senator Robert Kennedy, which reported Kennedy's reaction to Johnson's withdrawal from the campaign. The headline read as follows: KENNEDY NOT TOO OPTIMISTIC ABOUT FULL PARTY BACKING. This struck me as a strangely negative reaction from an experienced politician, and the lead paragraph justified my skepticism:

NEW YORK (AP) - Senator Robert F. Kennedy (Dem. N.Y.) said today that, despite President Johnson's decision not to run for another four-year term, he does not think the Democratic party now is united behind him.

Doubting that the party is "now" united behind him is not quite the same thing as not being optimistic about future support. Once again the headline writer has carelessly or deliberately failed to notice the difference.

This juggling of the semantic content of speeches and interviews is my final point about the handling of the news in the printed media. I have been struck by the preponderance of quotation in reporting of all kinds. Sometimes the quotation is direct, sometimes indirectly paraphrased in its entirety, and sometimes direct quotation and paraphrases are scrambled in the same sentence. The cautious reader raises his critical guard a little higher when the quotation marks begin to disappear, for it is at these points that slanting and distortion of what was really said most easily occurs. Reading education should make it clear to students that the syntactic blending of direct and indirect quotation is always suspect, and they should be given ample opportunity to analyze the products of the editorial mixmaster in newspapers and magazines.

I have been arguing against excessive emphasis on literary works as the basis for a developmental reading program and in favor of a more prominent role for the printed media of popular culture. This is not to say, however, that analysis of more sophisticated varieties of prose is not important.

But when the teacher turns away from the front page, he does not have to go always to Joseph Conrad or Winston Churchill for his models. If he is interested, for instance, in the rhetorical device of repetition and the effect of introductory adverb[redacted], he might turn from the Kennedy and Johnson stories to the syntax of James Reston of the New York Times, which appeared in the same issue.

"Instead of stepping up the bombing on Hanoi and Haiphong, he has limited it to the areas around the demilitarized zone. Instead of sending the 206,000 troops requested by Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the commander in Vietnam, he has approved an increase of only 24,500. Instead of following those who have said peace talks now were impossible and probably useless, he has made a new appeal to the enemy for peace and has even picked his negotiators."

Prose analysis will probably never be popular with the majority of students, but they will likely pursue it with more interest if the material under study smacks of the vital world of James Reston rather than of the elegant yet remote world of many literary classics.

The Spoken Media

Finally, I would like to remind teachers of a virtually untapped source of dynamic prose which a descriptive reading program must exploit. I mean the spoken word of the electronic media, particularly radio and television. The cheapness and availability of tape recorders has made it possible for any teacher to capture the sounds of history, and much of this oral material, transferred to tape and then printed, can make a rich contribution to reading education.

As a Canadian, may I offer an example based on the national life of my own country. Earlier this month the Liberal Party of Canada held a convention to elect a leader to replace Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, who is retiring. Canadians are normally a phlegmatic bunch where politics are concerned, but this particular convention resulted in a tremendous surge of interest because of the sudden ascendancy of a young man named Pierre-Elliott Trudeau, who eventually won the leadership. I plugged in a tape recorder during the course of several major speeches at the convention, including one by Trudeau, and emerged with some sizeable blocks of prose representative of the living English language on the lips of people charged with the political, social, and economic future of the students in our schools. And as I reflect on the syntactic and semantic content of some of this material, I am once again convinced that the teacher of reading with energy, imagination -- and a tape recorder -- does not have to rely on the rhetoric of another generation. To illustrate, perhaps a brief excerpt from a speech of Canada's next Prime Minister will serve:

"For many years I have been fighting for the right of reason, for the triumph of logic in politics over passion, for the protection of individual freedom against collective tyranny, and for a just distribution of the national wealth. . . . For me, liberalism is the only philosophy for our times, because

it does not try to conserve every tradition of the past, because it does not apply to new problems old doctrinaire solutions, because it is prepared to experiment and to innovate, and because it knows that the past is less important than the future. . . . An energetic country such as ours can become a model of the just society in which every citizen will enjoy his fundamental rights, in which two great linguistic communities and peoples of many cultures will live in harmony, and in which every individual will find fulfillment. For me, that is Canada."

With prose of this quality and currency to examine, as a teacher of reading I would not feel any need to rely excessively on the speeches of Burke or Lincoln or Roosevelt for my models. I hope that the American conventions later this year produce such splendid stuff, and whether they do or not, I trust that many teachers of reading will have their tape recorders running in any case.

And lest I appear faintly chauvinistic in my emphasis here, perhaps I should add that immediately prior to Trudeau's speech Senator Robert F. Kennedy was interviewed elsewhere on the sad occasion of the death of Martin Luther King. He said, "Violence breeds violence, repression breeds retaliation, and only a cleansing of our whole society can remove this sickness from our souls." That is elegant yet dynamic English prose, and well worth the effort of recording and transcribing as material for analysis in the reading programs across the nation.

Conclusion

The descriptive approach to language places a greater responsibility on the teacher, who is obliged to become an observer and recorder of language in the world today. The methods he uses to teach students to read must reflect the actual demands of the contemporary culture. It is a dangerous mistake to become overly sentimental about the joys of leisure reading and the happy hours wiled away in the company of a good book. There are tough, nasty, greedy, ambitious, people everywhere today, and unless the reading education offered by the public schools prepares our students to cope with the propaganda of such people, they will leave school in no better shape than the rabbit who is raised in the safety of captivity and then released in the harshness of the wilderness once it is half grown. Their fate, like that of the rabbit, is almost inevitable.

****